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PROGRAM The Today Show

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SUBJECT Interview with Admiral Stansfield Turner

BRYANT GUMBEL: Continuing our special Veteran's Day coverage of the launch of the space shuttle Columbia and reaction to the death of Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev now.

Joining Judy Woodruff, our Today correspondent in Washington, is Admiral Stansfield Turner, former head of the CIA.

And Mr. Turner, welcome. Admiral, how nasty do you expect the struggle to come will be in the Soviet Union?

ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: Bryant, I think the important point is that it's going to be prolonged. We don't want to count on the first man who appears, maybe it's tomorrow or today, to be the nominee for the head post, to be the permanent one.

In the Soviet Union, there are no established procedures for this kind of a change of leadership. And you have to remember that the head of the Soviet Union does not have a [sic] term of office like our president with four years. He never acknowledges that he's going to leave. Therefore, other political leaders who get too public in trying to campaign for his position usually get put down because he doesn't want people campaigning for his position which he doesn't acknowledge he's ever going to leave.

So I think we're going to be in for a period of transition before we settle down on what the real leadership's is going to be.

GUMBEL: So in U.S. terms, our watchword should be patience?

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ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes. I think we have to be patient. I think that you'll find that in situations like the arms control negotiations we're doing with the Soviets today, that they're not going to be able to take strong imaginative concessionary positions when they have a leadership transition going on.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Let me ask you about those arms control talks.

TURNER: Yes.

WOODRUFF: You just heard Malcolm Toon say he didn't think the negotiations would be much affected by what's going on? Do you agree with that?

TURNER: No, I think there will be a slow down, partly because I believe there'll be more military influence over the leadership in the Soviet Union in the near term.

WOODRUFF: Why is that?

TURNER: Well, whoever's going to take charge has got to have the support of the military. The military probably can't dictate who's going to be the next leader but I think they can sort of have a veto on it. So everybody will be currying the military. And military people are generally cautious about arms control.

Beyond that, our position that we've gone into the START talks with demands a lot of concessions from the Soviet Union. There's a big difference between us and I don't believe an interim leadership can make substantial concessions. So I think we're going to get a standoff for a period of time.

WOODRUFF: Do you think the American position is too tough?

TURNER: I think it asks a great deal of the Soviet Union, yes. It's asked them to dismantle a great many of what they consider to be their most important missiles.

WOODRUFF: You were head of the CIA for several years. Just how much do we know about what's going on over there right now?

TURNER: Well, because of what I was saying earlier, Judy, that no political leader can let his head rise too high before the old one dies. You don't really know who may be lurking behind the scenes or what the internal politics are. It's very difficult to get into the inner workings of the Politburo, so I think we're going to have to be patient and watch this thing evolve.

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WOODRUFF: Reading tea leaves.

TURNER: Reading tea leaves is often dangerous though because they're not too reliable.

WOODRUFF: Thank you, Stansfield Turner, for joining us.

TURNER: Thank you.

WOODRUFF: Bryant?

GUMBEL: Judy and Admiral, thank you both very much.